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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a discussion and statistical data concerning the various sources of college impact on students. Student-administration, student-faculty, and student-student relationships are discussed and tables are presented that represent the attitudes of 372 college students from 2 liberal arts colleges toward these relationships. Also discussed is the student's relationship with the college environment as a whole. It was found that at the 2 colleges studied, students encounter more positive than negative experiences. Some of the frequently encountered positive experiences include: fair, sincere, courteous and interested treatment from administrative personnel; communicative, respectful, fair and noncapricious treatment from faculty members; friendly, nonhostile behavior under competition; and feelings of individual worth. Frequently encountered negative experiences include: no voice in policies or procedures; administrative run-around; vague course objectives; and worries about the relevance of college to future work. It was also found that the source of most frequent positive and least frequent negative experiences is the student peer group. (HS)

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RESEARCH Currents

May 1, 1972

ERIC HIGHER EDUCATION

College Student Morale *by Lora H. Robinson*

College campuses have not been nearly as calm as many people think. A recent study by Bayer and Astin (1971) showed that almost 20 percent of higher educational institutions (an estimated 462) experienced at least one severe protest in 1970-71. This figure is only slightly lower than the estimate for 1968-69, a year viewed as one of extreme disruption. Consequently, it is timely to be concerned about the sources of student disaffection and alienation today.

This study covers several potential sources of impact within the college environment – students, faculty, administration, and student role expectations. Students' interaction with these people within their environment and their own social role expectations determine the nature of their student experiences and determine the type of student-college relationship that evolves. Data on actual student experiences within these four realms of impact are presented to provide a basis for assessing the character of the student-college relationship both in terms of its quality and content.

The research findings reported were obtained by the author in a study of 372 college students at two liberal arts colleges (Robinson, 1972). The "Student Experiences Questionnaire" was administered to a representative sample of all class levels at both schools. The instrument was designed to elicit students' estimates of the frequency of occurrence of a number of college experiences.

Student-Administration Relations

Students frequently criticize administrative policies and procedures. In the research literature there are a number of studies pertaining to administrative policies that reveal student feelings and attitudes about how adequately they have been integrated into the academic system. In this realm, Chase and Warren (1969), Goodman (1967), *Graduate Students' Opinions* . . . (1968), Stordahl (1969), and Taylor in Oxtoby (1967) provide examples of either the areas or the intensity of student criticism. For example, Chase and Warren found an increase in students' desire for more responsible participation in university affairs after a period of submersion in campus life.

The fact that students feel disassociated from administrators is suggested by Taylor's report. He found students thought of the administration as the higher echelon where decisions are made in absentia. Furthermore, students complained that they were not consulted about decisions affecting their future lives, that an atmosphere of "we" and "they" permeated the halls, and that administrative procedures resulted in depersonalization and alienation.

In *Graduate Students' Opinions* . . ., students were asked to list five satisfactory and five unsatisfactory aspects of their undergraduate experience. They criticized the administration for inadequately communicating and interpreting policy decisions, as well as for not providing visible and accessible channels through which student opinions or complaints could reach administrative ears. This study, along with Taylor's, depicts a few students' notions of defects in student-administration relations.

Part of the author's questionnaire results relate to student experiences that *indirectly* reflect administrative policies. For these questions, students were asked to judge their experiences with nonacademic personnel (defined as administrators, secretaries, clerks, counselors, health service personnel, campus police, attendants, janitors, etc.). The figure below summarizes student responses to five different experiences that correspond to aspects of the student-administrator relationship. The percentage of students who encountered a specific experience "once or twice," "occasionally," "commonly," or "never" is presented. *In dealings with nonacademic personnel, students have:*

	Never	Once	Occas.	Common
. . . found that information was easy to get	7%	22%	36%	35%
. . . not been notified about changes which concerned them	37%	37%	16%	10%
. . . encountered lack of interest in suggestions or complaints	28%	31%	28%	13%
. . . been frustrated by the complexity with which things are done	17%	27%	27%	28%
. . . had a voice in determining or influencing policies or procedures	49%	27%	21%	4%

These percentages indicate that even at small schools procedures do not remain simple. Over half of the sample had been upset by the complexity of some aspect of college operations. The data also suggest that while administrative personnel listen to complaints, students actually have little

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concrete involvement in policymaking. Finally, students seem to be well informed both in terms of the accessibility and dissemination of information.

In the area of administrative procedures, students also are affected by their *direct* contact with nonacademic personnel. Indeed the quality of these contacts are believed to play a significant role in students' education. Kauffman (1968) and Price (1968) urge the recognition of the importance of student-staff relations. For example, Kauffman suggests colleges and universities:

> . . . recognize that all their administrative personnel play a role in education, since they are the ones the students most frequently deal with. One wonders how much of the student unrest could be attributed to authoritarian policy, rude clerks, hostile and unfriendly secretaries, and testy tellers. . . . No matter how unimportant a staff position may seem to the administration and faculty, it must be recognized that the students have to deal with many of these people constantly.

The figures below summarize the kind of treatment students report experiencing from college staff. *In dealing with non-academic personnel students have:*

	Never	Once	Occas.	Common
. . . gotten the run-around	30%	38%	22%	10%
. . . been treated unfairly	53%	34%	10%	3%
. . . felt that they sincerely tried to be helpful	1%	18%	34%	47%
. . . been treated courteously	3%	6%	25%	67%
. . . felt that they were interested in their welfare	9%	22%	41%	28%

These data indicate that students receive fairly good treatment from their college clerks and administrative staff. The most common negative experience reported consists of getting the "run-around."

Student-Faculty Relations

Probably the one need most often expressed about student-faculty contact is the student's desire for sympathetic relationships. Foley and Foley (1969), Hunt (1963), Trotter (1967), Wedemeyer (1951), Shamos (1969), and Townsend (1956), among others, document this.

Responses to two questions indicate how frequently students encounter the desired sympathetic relationship with instructors. *Students report having an instructor who:*

	Never	Once	Occas.	Common
. . . became interested in them as a person	11%	37%	37%	22%
. . . made it easy for them to talk to him (her)	2%	20%	37%	40%

Although communications between faculty and students flow fairly easily, establishing closer relationships seems much rarer.

Sympathetic understanding is not the only quality students value in teachers. Traits appearing often in evaluations of effective teachers include: cooperativeness, democratic attitude, patience, wide interests, personal appearance, pleasing manners, fairness and impartiality, sense of humor, good disposition, consistent behavior, flexibility, and expression of recognition and praise for efforts (Nelson, 1955).

Hussain and Leestamper (1968) asked samples of student, faculty, and alumni to rank criteria for effective teaching in order of importance. All samples ranked *being well prepared for class* first; however there was a great deal of disparity in priorities among groups. Students ranked *motivating students to do their best* 13th (faculty, third); faculty ranked *being able to show practical application of subject matter* 21st (students, 9th); students ranked *being fair and reasonable to students in evaluation procedures* second (faculty, eighth). It is not surprising that students consider fairness as a high-priority item: it is directly related to their success and status in their student role. Other studies that indicate students desire fairness, impartiality, and trustworthiness from their instructors include those by Bousfield (in Nelson, 1955), Goodman (1962), Erickson (1969), Reid (in Ellis, 1954), and Trotter (1967).

The content of four questions related directly to these teacher attributes. Responses indicate how frequently students were likely to encounter teachers with undesirable traits. *Students report having an instructor who:*

	Never	Once	Occas.	Common
. . . showed more respect for one or two students than for the rest of us in the class	30%	42%	21%	7%
. . . was not entirely fair in his dealings	40%	51%	7%	2%
. . . made us feel that some later or hidden penalty might come from displeasing him	37%	42%	18%	2%
. . . handed out grades in a capricious or arbitrary way	38%	46%	13%	3%

These percentages indicate that many students will experience these unfavorable teacher traits at least once in their student career. In the student-teacher relationship currently the "power" is held by the teacher. It seems possible that the recent call for external exams and nongraded courses may have been motivated by the past abuse of this power.

How a course is conducted is also an area of interest to students; yet, information on the actual experiences of students is rare. In this study students were asked a number of questions about their actual class experiences. *Students report having an instructor who:*

	Never	Once	Occas.	Common
. . . assigned coursework which seemed pretty irrelevant and meaningless	17%	38%	32%	13%
. . . had such vague course objectives that we had to guess what he wanted us to know	20%	55%	21%	4%
. . . treated class members as though he viewed us as capable and responsible	1%	11%	36%	51%
. . . was genuinely interested in students' ideas, comments and suggestions about how the class might be run	6%	30%	37%	26%

Contradictions appear in students' responses to these questions. Fifty-one percent reported that frequently they were treated as responsible people. Yet this did not extend to ideas about running the class, reported "common" by only 26%. Although most students will probably encounter vague course objectives, the occurrence of meaningless coursework is even more frequent and is by far the most commonly encountered negative course experience.

Student-Student Relations

Although an effective student-teacher relationship may be of much consequence, the student-student relationship holds even more promise for the undergraduate. A number of educators believe students' peers have a greater impact on them than any other group in college (Freedman, 1960; Riesman and Jencks, 1962; and Newcomb, 1962). Given the potential effect of peer influence, it is surprising that there is so little attention paid to the student-student relationship by the higher education community. The prevailing attitude is that "they will take care of themselves."

This study explored the student-student relationship in some detail. Ten questions covered many aspects of student interactions. The percentages below show what kind of student relationships can be found on campus. *With peers, students:*

	Never	Once	Occas.	Common
. . . found that upperclassmen were active in helping them to adjust to campus life	5%	28%	39%	28%
. . . met others whom they just couldn't respect	7%	30%	45%	18%
. . . pitched in to help get the job done	11%	28%	38%	23%
. . . been unacquainted with most of the other members in class	10%	29%	37%	24%
. . . shared many attitudes and opinions	1%	12%	36%	51%
. . . found little help and sympathy for their problems	32%	41%	20%	7%
. . . felt they could "be themselves"	3%	6%	25%	66%
. . . found others critical but fair	8%	26%	43%	23%
. . . watched a class develop hostility toward a student who turned out more work than anyone else	52%	31%	13%	4%
. . . discovered that the competition in class hindered the development of friendships	64%	24%	9%	3%

A few of the item response patterns deserve comment. There is little known about the actual effects of academic competition on students. The questionnaire results reveal a clear denial that competition affects student friendships; however, the competition climate at the sample schools may not be as keen as elsewhere, since most also denied class members became hostile toward an aggressive competitor. On the whole, campus relationships appear to be good: students are cooperative, helpful, fair, and sympathetic. Despite the fact that some students did not merit respect, and some remained strangers, those with whom contacts were shared allowed them to feel comfortable and communicated ideas freely.

The Student Role

So far student reactions have been assessed in relation to significant personages in the academic environment. There are many other aspects of the student educational experience that are not tied to particular people. While every aspect of an institution's climate might be blamed or credited to someone, there are aspects that are simply a function of general feelings, not assigned to any particular source, yet are important to a student's educational experience.

For example, Trotter (1967) noted students expressed the feeling that they were under the "power" of the academic system, that information was not readily available to them, and that there was not much they could do about either. The longer the student remained in school, the better informed he felt; yet there was still a feeling of "powerlessness" and of only being able to "submit." Other students have expressed similar feelings.

> Despite all of the efforts so far, the U. is just one big Computer in the minds of most students. It's too big to be friendly; any concern for the individual's welfare must be achieved at the Departmental or Residence Hall level. However, the U. should still try to do away with its mechanical air. (*Reflections by College Students . . .*, 1968)

How accurately do these individual perceptions reflect student experiences at large? The responses of the student sample to several general questions concerning their student role provides some perspective to this question. *As students, we have:*

	Never	Once	Occas.	Common
. . . not felt part of campus life	29%	36%	23%	12%
. . . had a chance to do things we really like	4%	20%	37%	39%
. . . been stimulated to do our best	8%	27%	48%	17%
. . . wondered whether the work we have to do is preparing us adequately for the future	5%	17%	33%	45%
. . . felt like an individual, not just a number	2%	9%	32%	57%
. . . seen time pass quickly when studying	5%	14%	37%	44%
. . . been afraid of failing	24%	34%	19%	23%
. . . noted changes which are a sign of growth and progress	4%	10%	44%	42%
. . . felt pride in being at this school	12%	24%	36%	28%
. . . wished we were elsewhere doing other things	10%	28%	37%	25%

There are indications that students on the two campuses studied had experiences supportive of student role actualization. Most reported engaging in desirable activities, being stimulated, making progress, and being immersed in studies. Even with the

implied positive value of these experiences, a significant group of students have doubts about the value of their activities and a large number are concerned as to whether they will "succeed" or not. And there are indications of students' integration into the campus community – most feel they are a part of campus life, that they have an individual identity, and have pride in their school – still a significant portion wished they were elsewhere doing other things.

Viewed from this perspective, some of the responses seem contradictory; however, there is one possible interpretation that would account for this. Students seem to view the college experience as necessary and even challenging, as well as being satisfying and rewarding in many respects; still, at the same time, they see the student role as only a temporary one that ends abruptly when they leave college. To most students there seems to be little correlation between the demands made upon them in college and future "life" demands after graduation.

Summary and Conclusion

The data presented in this study provide information on a wide variety of student experiences. Taken together, the results offer a view of the quality and nature of the student-college relationship at two liberal arts colleges. Analyzed in more detail, specific items reveal the frequency with which both positive and negative experiences are encountered on campus. Frequently encountered positive experiences include:

- accessible information;
- notification of pertinent changes:
- fair, sincere, courteous and interested treatment from administrative personnel;
- communicative, respectful, fair and noncapricious treatment from faculty members;
- supportive, communicative, sympathetic, comfortable and fair treatment from peers;
- friendly, nonhostile behavior under competition;
- chances to do things really liked;
- growth and progress;
- engrossment in studies;
- and feelings of individual worth.

Frequently encountered negative experiences include:

- no voice in policies or procedures;
- administrative run-around;
- vague course objectives;
- and worries about the relevance of college to their future work.

On balance, at the two colleges that form the basis of this study, students encounter more positive than negative experiences. And the source of the most frequent positive and least frequent negative experiences are students' peers.

Hopefully, these results will provide some illumination into the nature of college students' experiences and serve as an example of a method for exploring other college climates. Such exploration is likely to help educators determine the quality and nature of their own campus environment and locate places for remedial action. In this way an assessment can ultimately be used to facilitate an institution's enterprise.

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